

All good things must come to an end. At least that's likely the case for T-Mobile USA customers who like using the carrier's Wi-Fi calling feature on certain smartphones. Based on the possible answer that AT&T may discontinue Wi-Fi calling while continuing it just to offload data from its 3G network continue to believe this merger should be blocked to protect competition for voice, data, texting services etc.

A CNET News.com writer recently discussed whether she thinks AT&T would likely keep the Unlicensed Mobile Access Wi-Fi calling feature that T-Mobile offers on some of its smartphones.

She did so in response to a very legitimate and good question worth addressing that she received. Here's the question:

UMA, or Unlicensed Mobile Access, Wi-Fi calling is a terrific (and often misunderstood) feature on some T-Mobile phones. It's one of the reasons I'm a T-Mobile customer, because it's something no other carrier offers. Will AT&T continue to support this feature after it buys T-Mobile? UMA is especially valuable overseas, because calls to U.S. numbers don't incur international roaming charges. They just use plan minutes.

I contacted AT&T spokesman Mark Siegel to get an answer to your question, and once again he told me that it's just too soon to say exactly what phones, service plans, or features AT&T will keep or kibosh after it buys T-Mobile USA.

The merger still has a long way to go in terms of getting approved. When the deal was announced last month, the companies said they expected the regulatory review process to take at least a year.

"Until this deal is closed, we remain an independent competitor to AT&T," a T-Mobile representative said in an email. "There is no change in service for our customers, and we remain committed to ensuring that our customers have the best experience possible using T-Mobile USA products and services, and that includes offering Wi-Fi Calling on T-Mobile smartphones."

As for UMA being a cool feature, I think you're right. This feature, which T-Mobile began testing in 2006, has been available on some BlackBerry devices, such as the Curve 8520, Curve 3G, and Bold 9700 and the Nokai E73 exclusively on T-Mobile's network. And it looked like up until last year, T-Mobile was expanding the device lineup for the feature. In November, it announced it would offer UMA-based Wi-Fi calling on some Android smartphones via an Android App. But the feature is not available for every Android phone.

T-Mobile initially made the app available for the myTouch and Motorola DEFY. Since then, T-Mobile has added or launched Wi-Fi Calling on the Samsung Vibrant, Galaxy S 4G, Sidekick 4G, plus the

Motorola Charm and Cliq2, along with the T-Mobile G2x and the MyTouch 3G Slide, according to Steve Shaw, vice president of Kineto Wireless, the company that provides the Wi-Fi calling functionality for T-Mobile. For a full list of devices, including Nokia and RIM phones, [click here](#).

Shaw said that about 80 percent of T-Mobile's smartphone line-up has Wi-Fi calling, and he estimates that nearly 20 percent of T-Mobile's total subscriber base has a Wi-Fi Calling enabled phone.

The UMA-Wi-Fi calling feature is integrated into the BlackBerry and Nokia phones, making it a seamless experience. Calls can be routed on and off the Wi-Fi network. But the Android app-based version isn't integrated into the device. So it doesn't switch between Wi-Fi and the cellular network as seamlessly as the native versions on the BlackBerry phones and the Nokia device.

T-Mobile has changed the service a bit since it first began offering it a few years ago. Previously, T-Mobile charged \$10 extra per month for unlimited voice minutes when your call was handled over a Wi-Fi network. Now T-Mobile doesn't charge people extra for the service, and calls routed over the Wi-Fi network are still counted against your monthly voice minutes. But the UMA Wi-Fi functionality allows you to make calls when a cellular signal isn't available.

So as you mentioned in your question, it's a very nice feature to have while traveling overseas, because you can use the Wi-Fi connection to make phone calls as though you were on T-Mobile's U.S. network, avoiding expensive roaming charges.

Unfortunately, I doubt AT&T will continue selling phones with the UMA feature, and I doubt the company will continue to support devices from T-Mobile that have that feature after customer contracts expire. T-Mobile uses the UMA feature mainly because it lacks good network coverage. By contrast, AT&T doesn't need Wi-Fi to fill in for dead spots for its voice service. The company has a robust national network footprint. Customers who experience dropped calls aren't experiencing those dropped calls because the cell phone signal is weak. They are experiencing issues because the networks are overloaded. Once AT&T acquires the T-Mobile spectrum, it will have a lot more cellular capacity to go along with its coverage.

That said, AT&T does see Wi-Fi as a useful offloading technology for data services. Through roaming arrangements, AT&T customers have access to more than 135,000 Wi-Fi hot spots around the globe, and T-Mobile customers can access an additional 45,000 Wi-Fi hot spots globally. AT&T currently offers smartphone customers in the U.S. the ability to connect at no additional cost to its hot spots for data services. This helps offload traffic on AT&T's congested 3G data network.

But I wouldn't hold my breath for Wi-Fi based voice calling. AT&T seems to view Wi-Fi purely as a data offload network technology.

Kineto's Shaw disagrees with me. He thinks that AT&T could leverage its existing broadband business to offload voice traffic onto Wi-Fi.

"The most interesting opportunity for Wi-Fi Calling is AT&T's 16 million DSL and U-Verse lines the company has into consumers' homes," he said. "Approximately 80 percent of those lines already have Wi-Fi. And nearly every analyst out there tells us anywhere from 50 percent to 66 percent of mobile usage happens indoors, particularly in the home."

Shaw makes a great point, but given the fact that AT&T has not included UMA Wi-Fi calling on its phones already, makes me think the company probably isn't that interested in leveraging in-home Wi-Fi to offload voice calls.

Correction and Update: T-Mobile USA offers the UMA Wi-Fi calling feature on several more Android phones. The story incorrectly listed that the feature was limited to two phones. The story was also updated with a comment from T-Mobile USA and comments from Kineto Wireless, the company that supplies T-Mobile with the UMA capability.

Sincerely,

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